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Central Intelligence Agency

Washington, D. C. 20505

16 June 1988

NOTE FOR: The Vice President

SUBJECT: History of Armenian-Azeri
Animosity

Attached is a short history on the origins of the enmity between Soviet Armenians and Azeris. I understand you discussed this issue with the PDB briefer the other morning and I thought you would find this of interest.

Sincerely,

*Bill*William H. Webster
Director of Central Intelligence

Attachment A few months ago Gorbachev called the ethnic problem his number one domestic problem. As noted in today's N.I.D. (p.1), he & Ligachev see this issue (Armenian) differently, which exacerbates his problem.

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History of Armenian-Azeri Animosity

The enmity between Soviet Armenians and Azeris fundamentally is based on religious and ethnic differences. Armenians are Orthodox Christians, Azeris ethnically Turkic and Shia Muslim. These differences over the centuries have produced acrimonious territorial disputes, especially over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Armenian and Azeri lands historically have been contested by the Ottoman Turks and the Persian Empire. The Russian Empire expanded into the Caucasus in the early 19th century, taking both ethnic groups under its tutelage and occasionally playing the two groups off against one another.

The deportation by Turkey of virtually its entire Armenian population in 1915, leading to the death of an alleged 1.5 million, enormously increased Armenian hatred of Turkic peoples--including the Azeris. At the same time, many Armenians came to see the Russians as protectors or at least as a "lesser evil."

When the Tsarist Empire collapsed in 1917, both Armenia and Azerbaijan existed for two years as independent republics. However, their mutual hatred made it easier for the Red Army to establish Soviet hegemony in the Caucasus in 1920, and both republics were incorporated into the USSR.

The Bolshevik takeover left Azerbaijan in control of Karabakh. But the Armenians regarded it as rightfully theirs both because of ethnic composition (overwhelmingly Armenian) and because of its special place in their national history. At first, Moscow awarded Karabakh to the Armenians, but when Turkey expressed opposition to a large Armenian republic on its borders, the Soviet leadership in 1923 shifted Karabakh (renamed Nagorno-Karabakh) back to Azerbaijan.

Since that time, the Armenians have periodically agitated for the return of Nagorno-Karabakh. According to Gorbachev economic adviser Abel Aganbegyan, who is ethnically half Armenian, for decades Armenian party meetings and public gatherings have quietly pressed the issue. In the 1960s and 1970s, Armenian dissidents circulated manifestos demanding the return of the region.

The Azeris' intransigence on the issue is intensified by resentment of what they see as Russian favoritism toward the Armenians--based on religious affinity and the larger representation of Armenians in Moscow's political elite. Moreover, Azeris feel victimized by demographic trends that swell the number of unemployed Azeri youth and worsen living conditions. These larger grievances indirectly feed into Armenian-Azeri tensions and increase the potential for Azeri violence against Armenian inhabitants of Azerbaijan.